Nixon Moves Quickly To Get Control of FBI

By Sanford J. Ungar 5-5-72
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President Nixon, in naming L. Patrick Gray III acting director of the FBI, has moved swiftly to assert the firm control of the White House and the Justice Department over the agency's powerful and restive bureaucracy.

So tenuous were the links between some of the FBI's key personnel and the Justice Department that in the 24 hours following the death of J. Edgar Hoover Tuesday, several assistant directors of the bureau seriously considered resigning.

But Gray, forewarned of the concern in FBI ranks that the agency might be weakened, called a meeting of Hoover's 15 top assistants at 4:30 p.m. Wednesday—only two hours after his appointment was announced at the White House.

During a somber session in Hoover's conference room on the fifth floor of the Justice Department building, Gray acted to avert a crisis by assuring the assistant directors that the Nixon administration intends to "maintain the FBI as an institution."

"I told them about myself," Gray said yesterday in an interview. "I tried to reach out and let them know we have serious challenges in the months ahead."

No sooner had Gray returned to his office two floors below in the Civil Division of the department than W. Mark Felt, deputy associate director of the FBI and one of Hoover's most trusted aides, who had also attended the meeting, was on the phone.

Felt said that Gray's talk had "made a deep impression on the men," the new acting director recounted yesterday. "He said that some of those who were considering resign-

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ing now would not," Gray said.

But Gray, an acknowledged neophyte about the FBI's operations who is hardly known among the bureau rank and file, conceded in the interview that "we'll have to see what flows" from his talk with the assistant directors.

The first letter Gray signed as acting director yesterday—drafted by Felt—was to 72-year-old Clyde A. Tolson, Hoover's longtime best friend and associate director and the only FBI official who did resign after his boss's death.

Tolson was so grief-stricken over Hoover's death that he declined to take a phone call from the newly appointed acting director Wednesday afternoon and sent his one-sentence letter of resignation to Gray through an intermediary.

To give time for Hoover's memorabilia and "personal files" to be moved out and for a paint job, Gray has postponed moving into Hoover's massive office until May 12.

In the meantime, however, several steps—symbolic as well as practical—have been taken to stress that a new era of accountability to higher authorities has dawned for the FBI.

At Hoover's funeral yesterday, for example, Acting Attorney General Richard G. Kleindienst was seated in the front row with the 15 assistant directors, in a position parallel to that of President Nixon on the other side of the aisle.

The President and Mrs. Nixon walked into the National Presbyterian Church with Gray and his wife Bea, and after the funeral the President met privately in his oval office with the Grays for 20 minutes.

During what Gray described as a "very warm" talk, Mr. Nixon and the new acting director, discussed their concern to avoid the impression that the FBI might now be guided by "partisan political considerations."

Mrs. Gray asked the President whether that concern was so great as to require her resignation as a volunteer worker with the Committee for the Reelection of the President.

Mr. Nixon replied that it was and that he would prefer that she resign.

Gray moved yesterday to extend his authority down through the FBI ranks. He directed Felt to call a meeting in Washington next week of the special agents in charge of the 59 FBI field offices across the country "to have a talk" about policy.

(It was only when he issued his order to Felt that the acting director learned how many field offices the FBI has.)

As soon as word arrived at the Justice Department Tuesday morning of Hoover's death, it was Gray who was designated by Kleindienst to take steps that would "maintain the integrity" of the FBI files.

Gray's first move at that point was to ask John P. Mohr, an assistant to the director, to "secure" Hoover's office until after the funeral.

Immediately upon his appointment by the President Wednesday, Gray asked top FBI personnel about the location of the bureau's much-discussed "secret dossiers" on leading political figures.

He was told that there are "no files on political figures."

But that response, Gray acknowledged yesterday, is "subject to verification."

Top Justice Department officials conceded privately yesterday that one of the administration's first concerns on Hoover's death was to neutralize the potential power of the top FBI personnel who were jockeying for the opportunity to succeed the man who ran the bureau for almost half a century.

The Justice Department officials made it clear that there also will be a searching review of whether the FBI's enormous resources should be redirected and reorganized.

Gray says he agrees with those who have argued that the bureau could play a larger role in combatting the nation's drug problem.

"There may be some changes indicated," the acting director said. But before making any major decisions, he explained, he will retreat this wetkend to his home in New London, Conn., "to think" and to draw up an "objective list."

Invitation to Ceaucescu

Reuter

BUENOS AIRES, May 4—Romania's President Nicolau Ceaucescu has officially been invited to visit Argentina at an as yet unspecified date, the Argentina Foreign Ministry announced last night.